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ABSTRACT

Teachers who wish to invite authors into the classroom, should consider a number of things. First, they should choose the right author. Children generally want to meet authors who write at their own levels of reading interests. If in doubt, teachers might call a publisher and ask the publicity director to make some recommendations based on the needs of the classroom. Second, authors and teachers should discuss their needs and preferences well in advance of the visit. This preparation should include such things as meal preferences, scheduling, transportation arrangements, and so forth. Third, to prepare the children for the author's visit, the teacher should familiarize the students with the author and his or her books by bringing the books into the classroom and sharing some biographical information about the author with the class. Fourth, since authors enjoy selling their works, arrangements should also be made with the school, parent group, or local reading council to purchase or sell the authors' books. Providing the author with media exposure and offering local groups an opportunity to meet with the author helps bring crowds and helps sell books. It is also a major enticement to the author. Finally, the teacher should make certain the author receives his or her fees promptly. Arrangements should be made for voucher signing and other similar formalities at the beginning of a visit. (HOD)

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WHEN AN AUTHOR COMES TO VISIT

by

Louise A. Jackson

I am an author of children's books. I am also a teacher-of children and of teachers of children. When I come to a school district, then, to serve as a visiting author, I tend to see things from two viewpoints. On the one hand, I am intensely involved as the author and speaker, sharing ideas about writing and trying to do all that the district has asked me to do. On the other hand - perhaps because I was a teacher long before I became a writer - there is always a part of me that remains forever a teacher, leaning casually and invisibly against the wall in the far corner, assessing the educational situation.

Usually, I am delighted with the enriching preparations I observe. The children have read and responded in eager anticipation of my arrival. They have plans for themselves in relation to my visit. Sometimes, though, I find myself wondering if the audience will find any long-term value in my presentation since both teacher and students apparently see the author's visit as a separate, discrete event--valuable only as a temporary respite from regular classwork and worth neither previous attention nor follow-up.

When I first encountered these sterile situations, I thought they were rare and probably happened only to me. However, conversations with other children's authors and with teachers have

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since led me to realize that most teachers could use some extra help in planning for and implementing the visit of an author.

So I made this list, developed from the suggestions of authors with whom I have talked, from teachers who have had lots of successful experiences in working with authors in classrooms, and from my own insights. It is designed to provide a guide from the first time you definitely decide to bring in an author until you wearily but happily wave goodby.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT AUTHOR

1. Authors like to know that they will have a reasonably receptive audience.

2. Remember, just any author will not do for just any group. Teachers and other adults are interested in authors at every level, but most children and adolescents are not. They want to meet authors at their own levels of reading interests. It is generally a waste of time and effort to spread an author all around, just so that everyone has seen an author!

3. When choosing an author, first consider the level with whom you want to work. Then begin your investigation. Call a favorite publisher and ask the publicity director to make some recommendations based on your needs. Talk to librarians, who often meet authors at their professional meetings. Attend an NCTE or IRA conference and talk to authors at the publishers' booths or after sessions where the author is presenting. Or, call nearby school districts that regularly have authors visit and ask them which ones they like best.

PLANNING BEFOREHAND

1. Authors have needs and preferences in relation to every aspect of the proposed visit. So do you. The time to clarify all of these is during the planning stage. Give yourself plenty of time to write or call back and forth.

2. Specifics will be mentioned under the various headings below.

CARE AND FEEDING OF AN AUTHOR

1. Authors need time to be alone. They give a lot of themselves in the process of their presentations and group sessions. The local librarian's guest room - lovely though it may be, and with the added advantage of being free-will not do. Make reservations at a comfortable motel, conveniently located.

2. Consult with the individual author about meal preferences. Will he or she be willing to eat meals with various groups such as the elementary librarians, the local writers' conference, etc? What about food preferences? You would not want to schedule a dinner meeting in a Chinese restaurant when the author detests Oriental food.

3. Clearly establish the procedures for charging meals at the motel restaurant. Tell the visitor whether or not the cumulative bill should be left at the desk or be delivered to you. (Tell the motel, too.) Above all, don't ask the author to "pick up the tab" and wait a month for reimbursement of expenses.

SCHEDULING

1. Authors have limits to their endurance. It costs a lot of money to bring an author to town, and you naturally want to

accomplish all that you can while he/she is there, but be reasonable. In your early conversations or correspondence with the author, describe your scheduling plans. The author will respond with his/her position and, through a process of negotiation, you will arrive at an acceptable pacing.

2. Remember the need for bathroom breaks!

3. It is often hard for an author to keep track of time. It is easy to get involved with the audience. Talking with fans is heady stuff! Gentle reminders from a tactful guide may be necessary.

4. Some authors enjoy small group interaction and are petrified by large groups. Conversely, some authors are performers and don't particularly care for the intimacy of question and answer sessions. Some authors are comfortable either way. Be sure to find this out during early communications.

5. Check also for permission to videotape presentations.

TRANSPORTATION

1. Authors need reliable transportation to and from schools. An author rarely knows your city and may be uncomfortable trying to find the way alone.

2. A few of the best known authors demand first-class plane tickets. If this is a definite requirement, they will say so in one of their early letters. Otherwise, you may assume that tourist-class is acceptable.

3. If the media and conference exposure is sufficient, you may be able to get the author's publisher(s) to underwrite all or part of the travel expenses.

PREPARING TEACHERS AND CHILDREN

1. Authors like to know that teachers and children are familiar with at least something about them and their books.

2. Several months before the author comes, check local library holdings. You will probably need to add copies of the author's newer books.

3. Insist that participating classes read and respond to at least one of the author's books. The students may make book jackets, bookmarks, draw murals, dramatize, write about their favorite parts or characters, or do any of a number activities that will enrich their comprehension and appreciation for the book(s).

4. Obtain biographical information from the publisher or from a source like SOMETHING ABOUT THE AUTHOR (Comire, Anne. Gale Research Co., Detroit) and distribute it to all participating classes.

5. Authors usually enjoy responding to a few questions that go beyond the four "old standards" of: "How old were you when you started writing?"; "How many books have you written?"; "How long does it take you to write a book?"; and "How much money do you get for writing a book?" It may help to discuss some broader questions ahead of time.

SELLING AND AUTOGRAPHING BOOKS

1. Authors would much rather put an autograph in a book that

someone buys than on a banquet program.

2. One of the main reasons that the author consents to take time away from his/her writing schedule to come and speak is to obtain the personal exposure that will help sell books. Be sure you plan for this aspect of the visit.

3. Consult the publisher(s). They will send you the number of books you think you need at a discount and they will take back the unsold, unautographed ones. (you will pay postage.) Order some hardbacked books and many more paperbacked ones.

4. Your school, parent group, or local reading council will make a profit if more books are sold than it takes to cover the postage. This inducement often will enlist the help of a sub-group who will take the selling off your hands. Check with central administration about policies concerning selling items in the schools. Some districts only allow the parent-teacher group to do this.

5. Provide a table and a comfortable chair for the author plus one more chair for the person whose book is being autographed. Note that if several hundred books need to be autographed, the author may prefer to autograph them before hand. Ask!

MEDIA EXPOSURE

1. Media exposure brings crowds and sells books. The author wants it. So does the publisher. And you must want it too, because it is a major enticement to the author.

2. Tap every possible source. Use the local newspaper, radio, and TV. Try for straight news releases, public service announcements, and interviews with reporters and local media personalities.

Put posters in book stores and send announcements to every principal and teacher in your target group.

SHARING THE WEALTH

1. Because a visit from an author is not an everyday occurence in most districts, many people will want to share in the visit. The problem, then, becomes one of picking and choosing.

2. Some of the groups (in addition to your target group) that you might consider including in some phase of the author's visit are: teachers and librarians in nearby districts, local reading councils, writers' groups, children's literature classes, local private and parochial schools, plus parents and vitally interested children who are not a part of your targeted group.

3. Some of the above-mentioned groups may attend a meeting at the public library, an evening potluck at a member's house, or a "Breakfast Conversation with the Author." A late afternoon general session may be a good spot for those who cannot get away from work or school earlier.

FOR SERVICES RENDERED

1. Authors like to receive fees promptly.

2. Try to arrange for voucher signing and other similar formalities at the first of a visit so that you can hand the author a check just before the end of the visit.

3. If special data is needed for local district forms, such as a Social Security number, etc., notify the author ahead of time so all the information can be given to you before the author arrives.

"LANGNIAPPE" (SOMETHING SPECIAL)

1. Authors like to feel they've made some friends along the way. A little bit of personal attention or time to be with just a few people for a quiet visit is nice.

2. Authors like to see new things and have new experiences. Going to a new place he/she has never been is often another inducement to come. If time allows, take the author to a special spot or two in your area.

OTHER SOURCES OF PRINTED INFORMATION THAT MAY HELP:

1. Botham, Jane and William C. Morris, "Authors and Artists as Speakers: Suggestions for Hassle-free Visits," School Library Journal, 24: 27-29, December, 1977.

2. Manthorne, Jane and Rose Moorchian, "Programs with Authors," School Library Journal, 25:39, December, 1978.

3. Miles, B. (ed.), "When Writers Visit School," Children's Literature in Education, 11:133-146, Autumn, 1980.